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MARLBOROUGH'S GHOST

Eighteenth-Century Warfare in the Nuclear Age

by

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MARLBOROUGH'S GHOST

Eighteenth-Century Warfare in the Nuclear Age

The scarlet-clad soldiers stood shoulder to shoulder facing out across the open field. On command, they moved forward in precise lines with measured cadence, marching with the skill engendered by years of practice on the drill field. But on the far side of this field stood blue-clad soldiers in equally precise formation awaiting the advancing troops. On they came in their closely ordered drill, stopping an occasion so their brigadiers could realign the ranks. The fateful command rang out when less than forty yards separated red from blue. A thunderous roar erupted from the volley-fired muskets as fingers of flame and rolling clouds of smoke poured forth to obscure both lines of soldiers. This parade-ground image of eighteenth-century European warfare is etched on the American consciousness. Even grammar school textbooks in the United States portray derisively the linear tactics imported by the British army during the American Revolution and exult in the clever tactics of the American rebels who refused to fight in the stylized European fashion.

The peculiar strategies and tactics of eighteenth-century European warfare would be little more than interesting footnotes in military history were it not for the many parallels between the problems that created the style of war in that earlier era and the problems confronting the United States today. These parallel problems lead one to speculate about the role of the US military in the pursuit of national objectives during the decades that lie ahead. However, before we can examine current parallels and raise questions about the future, we must address two questions. First, beyond the peculiar linear tactics already briefly described, what was the nature of eighteenth-century warfare? Second, what factors made warfare in that century so distinctive?

Military historians commonly refer to the time period extending from the latter part of the seventeenth century to the dawn of the French Revolution as the age of limited warfare. The limitations so implied were neither in terms of the number of wars fought nor in terms of the number of years in which war occurred. Wars in that era were frequent and often prolonged. Nor was war limited in terms of combat casualties. Eighteenth-century battles often resulted in

disastrous casualty rates. The limitations on war were instead much more fundamental. Wars during that period were generally fought for limited objectives, with limited resources, and with a very limited number of actual battles. Such circumstances seem difficult to imagine in the twentieth century, which has witnessed unlimited warfare fought for unlimited objectives.

The eighteenth century was the age of absolute monarchies in Europe (England being the obvious exception). The dynastic armies that supported these monarchs fought “foreign” wars for what can be classified only as dynastic objectives--a slice of land here, a city there, and succession to various thrones. Given such objectives, the common man had little to arouse his enthusiasm, little to fire his imagination, and little over which he would willingly risk his life. The passions raised by the religious wars of the seventeenth century were but a dim memory, and the ideological passions of popular revolutions had not yet appeared. The limited dynastic objectives of European monarchs spawned limited and relatively restrained warfare.

The limited size of dynastic armies also restrained warfare in the eighteenth century. Few volunteered to serve, and the primitive economic system of the time militated against conscription that could strip away the most productive members of society. As a result, mercenaries became valuable members of most western European armies, sometimes becoming the dominant faction. To fill out the ranks, monarchs often impressed nonmercenary soldiers into service from the dregs of European society. Another damper on the size of eighteenth-century armies was the limited taxation base of preindustrial economies. Limited tax revenues provided meager means with which to finance armies of any great size.

Generals in that era struggled to make the most effective use of the available technology. The standard infantry weapon was the muzzle-loading musket. Slow to reload and accurate only to about fifty yards against a man-sized target, these weapons dictated the tactics used on the battlefield. Rigid linear formations, maneuvered under the strictest discipline, made maximum use of short-range volley fire. But the exactions of linear tactics created significant problems. A new recruit required two years of drill and discipline to become a first-class infantryman. Such extensive training and the expense of mercenary soldiers made eighteenth-century armies expensive to train and maintain, particularly in relation to the limited financial base available to

most monarchs. As a general result, monarchs hesitated to put their expensive and hard-to-replace armies at serious risk.

Linear tactics also made the general style of warfare less than intensive. Commanders in the field had to agree tacitly to battle.

The slow maneuvers of clumsy linear formations meant that either side could quit the field of battle if the situation did not appear favorable. Consequently, maneuvering was much more common than battle itself. The acme of generalship was to maneuver across an enemy's lines of communication and force him to retreat or quit the area in question.

As strange as it may seem today, this stylized and restrained method of making war in the eighteenth century was a useful system for rulers to achieve limited objectives. All of the European monarchs faced essentially the same fundamental problems. Each army used the same basic technology, required, the same training, and faced similar economic constraints. To a large extent, all of the European monarchs played the game of realpolitik using the same general set of rules. The system was upset at midcentury by Frederick the Great, a monarch who was much more aggressive and ready for battle. He believed that hard fighting, rather than maneuver, decided the issue in war. He also considered his position desperate enough to impose both crippling taxation and a form of conscription on his Prussian subjects. Frederick served as a precursor to the changes wrought by the French Revolution, which returned ideology to European warfare and introduced the concept of the nation in arms. Both of these developments led Europeans down the path toward modern total war.

The objectives of wars fought in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries approached totality as nation-states often fought for their survival. The costs of achieving these objectives escalated as the tools of war became more efficient in their deadly purpose. This trend culminated in the Second World War, when the advent of nuclear weapons indicated that the costs of total war in the nuclear age could well exceed the value of any objective (which is, of course, the basis for the nuclear deterrence theory).

To a large extent, costs limited eighteenth-century warfare. In many respects, warfare since the dawn of the nuclear age has reentered the eighteenth century, at least from the US perspective. The fear of a nuclear holocaust and its intimate cost has limited not only US objectives in war but also the means used to achieve those objectives. But there are many other uncanny parallels between eighteenth-century limited warfare and the American situation in the latter half of the twentieth century. In the 1980s, Marlborough's ghost would have a sense of *deja vu*. These parallels suggest some disturbing prospects and raise some difficult questions that Americans must face if the military is to remain an effective instrument of national power. A few examples of the most obvious and important parallels will illustrate the point.

The objectives of warfare in the eighteenth century were dynastic rather than popular and ideological. Rarely did these objectives evoke the wholehearted and unflagging support of the common man. In the post-World War II era, the United States has cloaked its objectives with the ideological struggle against communism. But at the same time, these objectives have become difficult to articulate effectively and are thus "distant" from the common man. It is very difficult to infuse the bulk of the American citizenry with great enthusiasm to risk life and limb for the concept of "containment. "

The lack of popular objectives was one (but certainly not the only) reason that mercenaries and the impressed dregs of society populated eighteenth-century armies. Some contemporary observers maintain that an analogous situation exists in the current US military structure. They fear that the "all-volunteer force" is, in effect, a mercenary force. Rather than stressing patriotic duty, recruiting campaigns now emphasize pay, allowances, training, and experience applicable to civilian life. "A great way of life" seems a far cry from the stern visage of Uncle Sam saying, "I want you." Critics also point out that at times (generally dependent on domestic economic conditions); recruits in the all-volunteer era have had inadequate educational backgrounds and formed a less than representative racial mix.

Funding military forces continues to be a difficult task for modern governments. In the eighteenth century, the preindustrial taxation base severely limited the funding available for military forces. In the twentieth century, in contrast, the tax base is broad and deep in a mature

American economy. However, the US government has assumed an extraordinary number of expensive responsibilities to fulfill the perceived needs of society. Thus, despite the fact that revenues of the US government dwarf those of eighteenth-century monarchs, the fierce competition for available funds places severe limitations on the monies available for military purposes.

The heavy expense of building and maintaining eighteenth-century armies compounded the problem of limited funding. Monarchs had to recruit and pay mercenaries. Linear tactics required endless months of drill to instill both the requisite skills and discipline. In all, the European monarchs faced expensive problems. The twentieth-century parallels are painfully obvious. Recruiting the all-volunteer force become particularly expensive during robust economic periods. The training required to produce competent weapon system operators seems endless (note, for example, the time it takes to train a combat pilot--nearly two years in some cases--to attain minimum combat competence). One must also consider the costs of modern high-technology weapons, staggering costs not faced in the eighteenth century. The considerable costs of bronze cannons and soldiers' muskets pale to insignificance in comparison to the costs of modern aircraft, tanks, and ships. The modern American military is a very expensive undertaking.

Limited funding capabilities and the expense of operating armies were two of the factors that limited the size of eighteenth-century armies. The casual observer might believe that the parallels between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries would break down on this point. After all, even in peacetime the US military is substantial, some two million strong. However, one must consider the scale of today's US military commitment and the nature of modern warfare. Sophisticated weapon systems are critical in high-technology war. It is instructive to look at a few examples of these weapon systems when measuring the size of the US Armed Forces in relation to their global commitment. When one considers that the United States has only a handful of aircraft carriers, seventy-odd of its largest transport aircraft, and plans to purchase only a hundred new heavy bombers, then the true size of the modern military begins to come into better perspective. Many of the critical elements of high-technology warfare are in short supply and nearly impossible to replace with any degree of celerity.

Knowing that the general result of the problems faced by eighteenth-century monarchs was a reluctance to place their expensive and hard-to-replace military forces at serious risk leads on to a troubling question about the utility of modern US military forces. Over what issues will the government place these forces, or elements of these forces, at risk? For example, can the United States afford to wage “gunboat” diplomacy with modern aircraft carriers, knowing that if one is lost or badly damaged, nearly 10 percent of this particular form of power projection capability would be lost? Considering their cost and their limited numbers, can the United States afford to use B-1B bombers to drop iron bombs in some small conflict? How long would it take to replace a ship or aircraft lost in such an adventure? The replacement factor--the same problem faced by eighteenth-century monarchs--continues to plague modern military planners and may offer the most disturbing and limiting prospect.

One would suspect that given the nature of the US Armed Forces, they would be placed at risk only in those situations of perceived paramount importance to the nation. But what utility will US military forces have at lesser levels of realpolitik? If we fear to use our forces because we may lose them, will the US military be an effective instrument of power when less than vital interests are at stake? Are we doomed to suffer death by a thousand cuts as we wait for that singular moment when the issue is great enough to risk the use of our forces?

These questions elicit interesting speculation and give a new perspective to the quality/quantity controversy. However, they form just one part of much more fundamental problem relating to the parallels between eighteenth- and twentieth-century limited warfare. Monarchs in the eighteenth century faced common problems and arrived at relatively common solutions. The military establishments of that era were effective instruments of power because everyone engaged in power politics with an accepted set of rules. The great upsets to the system came when someone broke the rules. The changes wrought by these upsets doomed the age of limited warfare and many European monarchies.

The experience of the United States in the modern era of limited war has been quite different. Rather than facing our major adversary (both the United States and the Soviet Union

have been very wary of even limited direct confrontations), the United States has engaged in limited warfare with minor powers on the periphery of its vital interests. Success has been limited, at best. The US experience in Southeast Asia illustrated clearly the complex problems faced by a superpower attempting to wage limited war against a minor military power. Unlike the limited warfare of the eighteenth century, the problems faced and the solutions reached were different for each side. There were no accepted rules of the game.

The United States fought a truly limited war in Southeast Asia. Less than vital American interests led to limited, vaguely defined objectives. As a result, the military means used were both limited and tightly controlled. The US government did not attempt to mobilize the home front. On the contrary, the government pursued a “guns and butter” philosophy, as it attempted to wage war overseas and effect social reform at home simultaneously. Finally, since it was a limited undertaking, the United States sought a negotiated settlement, believing that reason would prevail and that all the belligerents could reach mutually acceptable compromises.

America’s adversaries orchestrated their efforts from a different sheet of music, however. They perceived that their vital interests were directly at stake. As a result, they fought not a limited war, but a total war. They mobilized their population and economy, fought with all the means at their disposal, and persevered despite awesome losses. Finally, they viewed the American willingness to negotiate and compromise as a weakness to be exploited.

In retrospect, the eventual outcome of the US involvement in Vietnam should have been obvious from the beginning. The United States was unwilling to unleash all of the power at its disposal. In contrast, the North Vietnamese were willing to make any sacrifice to achieve their objectives. The war was a test of willpower rather than of firepower. In such a struggle of wills, a mobilized and motivated society with vital interests at stake has an incalculable advantage.

But, what of the future? Many believe the most likely kind of future US participation in armed conflict will bear a striking resemblance to the war in Southeast Asia--a limited war against a minor power contesting less than vital US interests. As the end of twentieth century approaches, it becomes clear that if the United States is to be effective in protecting its interests

throughout the world, it must learn to deal with the paradoxical situation of fighting limited wars against opponents who are fighting unlimited wars. Ironically, 200 years ago, as the end of the eighteenth century approached and the French Revolution began, the soldiers who marched shoulder to shoulder in the dynastic armies of Europe faced a similar predicament.

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